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OF THE  
WORKING CLASSES,  
AND  
THE PROMISES

OF THE  
Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P.

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BY MR. J. M. BRINDLEY,  
*Of Birmingham.*

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# The Homes of the Working Classes,

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## THE PROMISES

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RIGHT HON. JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.

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Recently the attention of the workingmen electors has been called to a very difficult and exceedingly grave subject, namely, the condition of the homes in which they dwell. More than one plan has been proposed by which it is intended that the home life of the toilers of the great towns shall be rendered happier and brighter in the future. That the evils of overcrowding in unsanitary areas need grappling with at once must be patent to all who have given the slightest study to the subject. In London and in many provincial towns the poor are huddled together in unwholesome dens, which must be detrimental to health, and tend to stunt the intellectual development of the children, the future electors of the country. Chief amongst the schemes which have been propounded to remedy a deplorable state of affairs is that of a great statesman, the Marquis of Salisbury, who would have the Imperial Legislature take the matter into its early consideration, and by public loans assist corporations in their endeavours to deal with unhealthy areas. All must recognize the great difficulty which surrounds any proposal of this kind. Time, skill, labour, and expense must be freely given to succeed in grappling with so great an undertaking. Vested rights and vested interests must be fairly and honourably dealt with, and one class must not be injured for the purpose of benefiting another. There can be no higher duty for a legislative body to undertake than to do all that is possible towards improving the homes where those who are the backbone of the nation pass their lives.

Mr. Joseph Chamberlain took upon himself the task of replying to the statesmanlike proposals of Lord Salisbury. He would lay upon the owner of the land the onus of providing better dwellings, in place of those which have in the lapse of years fallen to decay; a proposal which is foreign to the law, and which is manifestly unjust, the landowner in most cases having let out his land on lease for a long term of years, at a rental which seldom returns more than three or four per cent. on the capital invested.

The question, however, we have chiefly to deal with is Mr. Chamberlain's right to be heard again upon the subject, after the broken faith and the utter financial failure which have characterized his clumsy efforts to deal with the question in Birmingham.

On the 27th of July, 1875, the Town Council of Birmingham, seduced from its common-sense and business capacity by the glamour of the eloquence of Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, appointed a committee to prepare an improvement scheme under the recently-passed Artizans' Dwellings Act of Sir Richard Cross and the late Conservative Government. That Act gave to municipal authorities powers to acquire properties in crowded and unsanitary districts. There were in Birmingham at that time several such districts which might have been dealt with under the Act. Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, then Mayor of Birmingham, and the one light before which the rushlights of the Corporation paled their ineffectual fires, had visited Paris, and conceived the idea of planting trees in the streets, which have persistently refused to grow, although nourished with liberal sewage and moistened with Corporation water. At this period Mr. Chamberlain, no doubt, formed the project of erecting a street of palaces which should vie in architectural splendour with the boulevards of the Continent. Mr. Chamberlain at once seized upon the Act of Sir Richard Cross for the purpose of carrying out what was called a great improvement scheme, and in bringing that scheme before the Town Council he made the distinct promise that in carrying it into effect one portion of the plan would be to provide better dwellings for the working classes displaced by the destruction of property necessary to carry out the scheme.

Having aroused the sympathy of the Council and the town by a heartrending description of the miserable condition of the wretched inhabitants of the slums which formed a portion of the scheme, Mr. Chamberlain said, "We want to make these people healthier, we want to make them better, and I want to make them happier. Just consider for a moment what forlorn and desolate lives the best of these people must live in courts like these. It makes my heart bleed when I hear the descriptions Mr. White and other persons, who are well

acquainted with the district, have given of the dreariness, the intense dreariness, the lack of everything that can give interest or pleasure to life in these places." After this expression of his own deep sympathy with the working classes, the orator, in a promise so clear and distinct as to be unmistakable, proceeded to unfold his remedy: "Well, we are going to displace 9,000 people, and the architects tell me they have not the slightest doubt that by a rearrangement of the blocks of buildings and by an improved construction they will be able to build good houses for 18,000 people." After referring to the Glasgow lodging-house system, he goes on to say, "Well, then the committee will no doubt also erect buildings which I should say will be in flats or storeys. The time has come when that must be done if the poor are to be housed within close proximity to their work and for reasonable rent." On the rent question Mr. Chamberlain went on to say, "We shall not be able to secure these houses being built for the use of the public at lower rates than hitherto have prevailed, yet the actual result will be that the rental will not be much higher than they have hitherto been accustomed to pay."

Having given Mr. Chamberlain's promise to erect dwellings in place of those destroyed, let us see what the actual rents were which the people had hitherto been accustomed to pay. Mr. Councillor White, in proposing the scheme, said, "he had seen houses at 1s. per week, others at 1s. 9d. and 2s. 3d.; the last figure appeared to be a tolerably high rent."

On the strength of such pleas alone the Town Council would have been prepared to pass the scheme, but connected with it was the brilliant financial prospect which Mr. Chamberlain held forth. The scheme was to cost the town only £18,000 per annum for fifty years; by the increased rateable value of property £6,000 per annum was to be obtained, thus reducing the net cost of the scheme to £12,000 per annum. As 18,000 artisans were to be provided with model dwellings, the majority of the townsmen endorsed the action of the Town Council.

Well, a million and a half of money was sanctioned to be borrowed to carry out the great improvement scheme. Many properties were purchased on the route of Mr. Chamberlain's new street, which was to rival the glories of Continental cities. By no stretch of imagination could the properties purchased between New Street and Bull Street be called unsanitary. Three years went past, and in 1878 it gradually dawned upon the Birmingham people that they had been deceived, and that their consent to the scheme had been obtained under false pretences. Questions showered thick and fast upon the Improvement Committee as to when they would begin to build the artisans' dwellings. The chairman of the committee, Mr. White, was obliged to confess that it would be impossible to provide



such dwellings at a lower rental than 7s. per week. This roused such a storm of indignation, that it was found necessary to bring Mr. Chamberlain from London to bolster up the credit of the Improvement Committee. On June 11th, 1878, the hero of the scheme delivered an oration to the Town Council which occupied five columns of the *Birmingham Gazette*, in which he treated the scheme almost solely as a town improvement and commercial transaction. He appeared surprised that people should suppose that it was possible to build cheap houses. He made this astounding announcement: "There seemed to be some misapprehension on the part of the ratepayers in reference to the matter. It was said that they were going to build houses for the working classes at 7s. per week, and that they would not be accommodated there. *They were not going to build a single house*; they were not allowed to build a single house; the Act did not entrust them with that duty. They were land-letters, not builders; all they had to do was to let the land to builders. The kind of houses and the rent of the houses that would be put upon the land rested wholly with the builders, and not with the Council." And this in the face of the distinct statement, three years before, that the Improvement Committee would do the work. No wonder all but the Caucus-ridden Radicals loudly expressed their indignation at the trick which had been practised on the town. However, to gloss over to some extent the glaring breach of faith, Mr. Chamberlain had yet another proposal and another promise. The Council had acquired a piece of land, a mile away from the contemplated destruction of artizans' dwellings. And this is the proposal: "With reference to the land acquired in Newtown Row, the Council at the last meeting authorized the committee at once to take steps to lay out and let for artizans' dwellings, and by so doing they had made an important commencement of the sanitary scheme, because whenever those houses were built there would be 179 separate occupations, accommodating probably 600 or 700 people; and this would be the first step before they could proceed to displace persons in the unsanitary ones." The promised accommodation for 18,000 persons shrinks down to 600 or 700. But mark that these dwellings were to be erected before any persons were displaced. Let us see how this promise was kept which Mr. Chamberlain was brought down from his duties in the House of Commons to make. First for the land in Newtown Row. Part of it was a disused clay pit, whilst another portion of it had in former years been utilized as a burial place by some Nonconformist body. Afterwards it was let to a market gardener, who grew famous rhubarb in the mellow soil. It was also used as a rabbit warren, and large numbers were raised amidst the old graves. The Corporation proceeded to prepare this savoury

spot for the displaced poor. They carted the sweepings of the streets and the accumulated filth of the markets to the spot, and tilted it into the hollow places. Having thus "laid out" and levelled the spot, they let it out, and building operations commenced. Meantime the destruction of the homes of the poor went merrily on. Then, to the amazement of everyone, it was found that the so-called artizans' dwellings erected on the old burial ground had taken the form of large and handsome shops, at a rental of about £40 per year. The speculators who ventured to take the land recently came to a "tremendous smash," as most people have done who have ventured to have anything to do with the Corporation in connection with land. Although the Corporation could not build, they endeavoured to make some provision for the people displaced. They patched up and let out many of the houses which they had before declared to be unsanitary. These patched-up places were let out to anyone who felt disposed to take them at higher rentals than were asked before they passed into the hands of the Corporation. Nay, it was stated the other day in the Council Chamber, and not denied, that, although the Corporation posed as a moral body, yet some of these patched-up houses had been let out as brothels, and the moral Corporation had absolutely been receiving the wages of sin and iniquity.

This is no new thing in Birmingham. Three or four years ago I drew attention to the fact that the Corporation were letting out places in another part of the town for this abominable purpose. Thus, up to the present time, or eight years after the promise to build, not the ghost of a dwelling for artizans has been erected. As time goes on, the promise fades farther and farther into the background. The displaced poor have been obliged to herd together more thickly in areas as unsanitary as that from which they were driven. In many cases two families had to herd in one small house. This would not have been the case had houses been erected at a reasonable rental, as distinctly promised.

Eight years have passed away since the scheme was floated, only half the proposed grand street has been made, and not a third of the portion laid out is occupied. Several of the plots of land taken are occupied by persons directly interested in the success of the scheme, because it is the child of Mr. Chamberlain. For instance, the proprietors of the *Daily Post*, Mr. ex-Councillor Marris, the Liberal Club committee, and other ardent Radicals gave the thing a start at enormous ground rents. By underhand influence the Government were persuaded to take a site for the new County Court, against which a most vigorous protest was made by the solicitors of the town. A speculator, who was recently made bankrupt for a large amount, took several sites and erected Inns of Court to accommodate the lawyers, who, it

was supposed, would have to follow the County Court. The chambers are there, but at present there is no sign of tenants. Hitherto heavy failures have been the order of the day in connection with Corporation Street. The few shopkeepers who have ventured to open are crushed to the earth by enormous rentals; it is impossible for them to live, and already some have had to seek the friendly shelter of the County Court so considerately placed at their very doors. Amongst other conspicuous failures an arcade was erected over an underground restaurant. Not a shop in the arcade is let, and the keeper of the restaurant liquidated. Every effort has been made to make the street go, but all without effect. As an experiment one lot was put up without reserve for public competition. The price realized, however, was so miserably poor, that the committee have not repeated the experiment. Every day shows more clearly the mad folly of Mr. Chamberlain's scheme, and the shameless distortion of the Artizans' Dwelling Act to carry it out. Every day shows more clearly the folly of purchasing good sound properties which were paying high rents and ratals, for the purpose of making an unnecessary street. A few exorbitant ground rents have been made by the Corporation, but, as I have shown, with the result of ruining many honest tradesmen. Now let us compare the present financial aspect of the scheme with the rosy picture drawn by Mr. Chamberlain on its introduction to the town. The total expenditure up to the present time is, according to the last report, £1,503,667. The annual cost of the scheme is £70,823 (not £18,000). After deducting £32,004 received by the Corporation for rents from patched-up unsanitary dwellings and brothels inclusive, we find an annual deficiency of £38,858 (not £12,000 as estimated by the author of the scheme). Add to this enormous loss to tradespeople whose businesses have been injured by the progress of the new street and the removal of the classes which formerly supported the trade of the neighbourhood, and the very large decrease in ratals from voids in the neighbourhood of the area. To make up for which deficiency £20,000 per annum, the profits on the gas manufacture in the hands of the Corporation, is taken out of the pockets of the gas consumers. Thus an indirect rate to that amount is established and collected. Again, several streets which were formerly second-rate business thoroughfares in the immediate neighbourhood of the scheme have, since the opening of the new street, been greatly injured. Large numbers of shops are to be let. Landlords lose rent, and the Corporation rates. As a natural consequence properties have materially decreased in value. To sum up, the result has been what a few sensible business men predicted it would be, an utter falsification of Mr. Chamberlain's roseate figures, bankruptcy and ruin to many, the scattering of thousands of artizans and poor people, injury to

property owners, a depression in the property market in Birmingham such as was never before experienced, and the gloomy foreboding of future heavy loss. Under these grave circumstances is it not astounding that, in the face of facts such as have been detailed, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain should again dare to pose as the champion of the working classes? That he, of all other men, should presume, in face of his gigantic failure, to reply to an article by a statesman like Lord Salisbury; that he, in the face of his broken promises, in face of his absurdly ridiculous miscalculation in finance, in face of the sanitary failure which has resulted from the non-provision of dwellings for those destroyed and the consequent overcrowding in other unsanitary areas overcrowding which has rendered such dire diseases as scarlet fever and smallpox chronic instead of epidemic in the town, should publicly set himself up as an authority on the subject is barefaced audacity. In view of all these fallacies, will the working-men of Birmingham again trust their welfare in the hands of one who has so grossly deceived them, who has abused the trust the town of Birmingham reposed in him, broken promises to build artisans' dwellings, solemnly-made promises, on the strength of which the town endorsed the scheme? If ever there were a flagrant case of false pretences it is this, and the only punishment is the arraignment of the pretender at the bar of public opinion, and the withdrawal of the misplaced confidence with which he has been honoured.







